



What remains of the intersubjective?: On the presencing of self and other



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ABSTRACT

Recent work in the social sciences has been concerned with how we understand the subject. This has entailed critiquing the ways the subject has traditionally been understood – as a mental entity existing prior to and so organizing our experience of the world. In its place a relational subject has been posited, one emerging through a combination of affective experiences, performative enunciations, and haunting absent presences. However, the implications of such critiques for how we understand intersubjective relations have not been discussed. What remains of intersubjectivity when any subject entering into a relation has already been decentred amid a more-than human ecology of affective relations? In response, this paper draws on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy in developing understandings of the socio-spatial constitution of subjectivity/intersubjectivity in terms of movements of presencing. Here the body-subject is always in approach to itself and others, but neither is actually reached, never (self) present, always already receding: a spacing at the heart of any relation. The discussion is interspersed with a series of narrative sections outlining an encounter between a street performer and their audience which draw attention to a number of key themes in any understanding of intersubjectivity and attempt to expose this inherent dis-position.

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1. Introduction

This paper is interested in the centrality of bodily registers of experience to understandings of subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Whilst a range of critiques have recently been made of traditional understandings of the subject (see Dewsbury et al., 2002; Dewsbury, 2007; Harrison, 2000, 2008; McCormack, 2003; Pile and Thrift, 1995; Rose, 2006; Wylie, 2005, 2006, 2009), little has been written about the implications of these critiques for how we understanding intersubjective relations (though see Harrison, 2007a, 2007b). Such work has enacted “a transposition of the operations of subjectivity from the individual’s head to a particular relation between self and world” (Rose, 2006: 546) and so understands the subject as “an assemblage composed of human and non-human materials” (Coward, 2012: 468). These compositions are permeated with affective relations and it is out of these that any such subjectivity emerges or devolves.

However, if we are to question the presence of an “I” that is static, that governs through “internal representational thought” (Rose, 2006: 546), and is self-present, and rather posit an “I” that is

an “incessant coming-and-going” (Nancy, 1991: 98), emerging through “direct sensible impressions” (Rose, 2006: 546) and performative enunciations (Butler, 1999), this asks a number of questions about how we understand intersubjective relations. If the subject is not self-present, how can we be present to and for other subjects? What remains of the intersubjective when any such subject entering into a relation has already been decentred amid a more-than-human ecology of affective relations?

This paper approaches these questions through the work of Jean-Luc Nancy. Nancy’s (1991, 1992) writings on community have recently gained interest in the social sciences (see Panelli and Welch, 2005; Popke, 2003; Rose, 1997). However, this paper will highlight the significance of Nancy’s broader discussions of ontology as being singular plural (Nancy, 2000), being as being-with (Nancy, 2008a), and his co-existential analyses of subjectivity and the body (Nancy, 2008b), to thinking about the socio-spatial constitution of subjectivity and intersubjectivity (also see Bingham, 2006; Simpson, 2009; Welch and Panelli, 2007). These writings build on recent accounts of subjectivity in that they seek to understand the perpetual and ongoing emergence of subjectivity in terms of a movement of “presencing” and so approach an understanding of intersubjectivity that does not assume a self-present subject. However, they do so outside of the dichotomous tension

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of same and other, presence and absence, that is increasingly prominent in recent work rethinking subjectivity (see [Harrison, 2007a, 2007b, 2008](#); [Rose, 2006](#); [Wylie, 2009](#)). Nancy posits a “spacing” – a contemporaneous presentation and withdrawal between the self and the other in their relations with one another – at the heart of any relation and so an understanding of intersubjectivity¹ based not on reciprocity, nor alterity, but on a *singular plurality emergent in and through the being-with of bodies*.

While primarily approaching these conceptual points, the paper is also interspersed with a series of narrative sections outlining an encounter from the author’s ethnographic experiences of street performing in the UK. These narrative sections are intended to play a specific role in the paper. Rather than being “empirical data” analyzed in the development of a grounded theory of intersubjective relations, they are included, and at points reflected upon, as the events that unfolded that day are exemplary of, and give tangible form to, a series of themes of particular significance to the rethinking of intersubjectivity undertaken here and in Nancy’s work. By including them, the paper seeks to give greater presence to the lack of assured self-presence that circulates through encounters between body-subjects; they draw attention to the exposure, dis-position, and lack of reciprocity in, and the inherent affective-corporeal nature of, intersubjective relations.

Following the narration of the initial moments of the encounter, Section 2 turns to prominent critical discussions of subjectivity and relationality and articulates the original contribution of Nancy’s work in relation to these. Following the further unfolding of the encounter, Section 3 turns to conceptualizations of intersubjectivity and engages these in light of both the rethinking of subjectivity undertaken in Nancy’s work and the issues raised by this event. The penultimate section of the paper concludes the encounter and Section 4 concludes the paper by demarcating the space opened up for future thought around an affective understanding of subjectivity/intersubjectivity based on the being-with of bodies.

The encounter part 1 – “I love you”

I arrived in Broadmead, a central shopping area in Bristol, UK, around 1.10pm. It was very busy with workers on their lunch breaks. I set up to play outside a Tesco, opposite the entrance to the Galleries (an indoor shopping mall), and to the right of a Cornish Pasty shop. To my left, in the centre of the pedestrianized street, were some benches. To the right, again centre-street, some bike racks and a telephone box.

For the first 30 minutes people rushed about and didn’t pay me much attention. However, once the lunch-rush receded things became a little mellower and I started to receive a little more attention. People were friendly and some stopped to chat. Some pre-school aged children started to dance about in the street to the music I played while their parents talked. They smiled and, once the conversations stopped, waved as they walked away.

Around 2.00pm things changed. A man who looked rather worse for wear wandered into the pedestrian street-space. He was wearing shabby clothing, a large ill-kept full beard, a large bloody cut over one eye that couldn’t have been more than a couple of days old. Generally, he looked as though he’d been sleeping rough and drinking. He had blood-shot skin around his cheeks and nose. He stopped dead at the other side of the street and, with a look of

recognition, walked toward me. I was playing a bossa nova called “Signe”. He arrived at my side of the street a little before I finished the song. Looking intently, he stood a few feet from me as I played the closing bars. As I finished he took another couple of staggered steps forward and lent to put money in my hat. I felt guilty. He looked like he needed the money more than me. However, rather than walk away or step back, he stood his ground and looked up. Without any warning he looked me in the eye and said: “I love you”.

2. Subjectivity – saying “I love you”

To say “I love you” is to mark a connection. Love is commonly taken to be about a union, an embrace, bonding, a coming together of individuals as one, unity, a completion of one by the other. A moment or duration of emotional, spiritual, and physical connection. Mutual and persistent presence between two selves.

In “Shattered Love” Nancy suggests something different. [Nancy \(1991: 92\)](#) does suggest that “[n]othing leads us more surely back to ourselves than love”. However, he goes on to argue that the “I” does not return to itself from love as something of this “I” is lost or dislocated in the act of loving. Love here is about a fissure. A fissure between those who love and also a fissure in the lover him/herself. For [Nancy \(1991: 96\)](#), “[a]s soon as there is love, the slightest act of love, the slightest spark, there is this ontological fissure that cuts across and disconnects the elements of the subject-proper”. Love “shatters” the self, transforms it. The I that loves and the I that is loved are not static substances but are constituted and transformed in and through love(ing).

Such a (re)thinking of love is poignant here. It questions the stability of the self and the subject that loves or is loved. It highlights the unsettling nature of any declaration of love. Such a declaration constitutes the potential for an event, for change, in the sense of it marking “the encounter between two differences ... contingent and disconcerting” ([Badiou, 2012: 29](#)).

Foregrounding this encounter of differences questions the status of the self as something that we can be present to, and especially as something present in advance of an encounter, proactively making sense of events as they happen. The initial encounter outlined above draws attention to a moment-by-moment shift in my sense of self and in my sense of that space. Throughout my time performing there “I” moved from feeling like a marginal and inconsequential feature of the bustling streetscape, to being uplifted by the reaction of those listening and their interest in the performance, to feelings of guilt and sympathy, to being taken aback and disorientated by the initial stages of the encounter with the man who said he loved me. That “I” was perpetually playing catch-up as it came to its self, at the same time as it was already moving away from itself, in the unfolding of this.

This latter encounter, and its subsequent unfolding in particular, is exemplary of what can be understood to be a situation of originary and ongoing dis-location of the self, and in turn a simultaneous dislocation of any other self. This “I love you” marked the inaugural moment of one particular sequence of affectual subjectifications whereby my self was differentiated from itself and from the self of this other. Thinking through this further opens onto an understanding of how separation is at the heart of any intimacy with both self and others, and so onto a particular take on “the spacing of what we all too easily call ‘intersubjectivity’” ([Harrison, 2007a: 593](#)).

2.1. Presence and absence

Decentering the autonomous subject in these terms raises a tension between the relative emphasis placed on presence and/or absence in the subject’s relations to itself, others, and the world.

¹ Nancy’s writings repeatedly insist on their distance from this term, especially as it is understood in its phenomenological variations (see [Nancy, 2000](#)). Therefore, throughout the paper there will be an effacement of the commonplace understanding of intersubjectivity, and by implication subjectivity, by moving towards an understanding of the being-with of bodies as the basis for any such relation.

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